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PACIFISM AND THE JEWS  
NIEMOLLER AT THE WRI CONFERENCE, AUGUST 1969

The candor, openness to challenge, and mutual respect that characterized the discussions in turn opened me to realize some of the elements of dogmatism in my own anti-pacifist stance. One such moment for me came in a lunchtime discussion with two thoroughgoing pacifists, the Quaker George Willoughby and Bill Sutherland, who had long lived in Tanzania as an advisor to Nyerere.

As I recall, I was rehearsing, for their response, a litany of fairly standard counter-arguments to the supposed pacifist position. I mentioned the right--and it seemed to me (then and now) the rightness--of the British determination to resist the Luftwaffe with defensive antiaircraft fire. I don't think absolute pacifists do have a convincing answer to this, given the immediate circumstances. George and Bill did begin to redirect the question to the politics and the mentality that had conspired, over the years, to create that situation, which is an aspect of the pacifist argument that has a great deal to contribute. But without giving that adequate attention, I moved on to what is commonly taken to be the decisive clincher: How could nonviolence have saved the Jews?

That trump card is usually played fairly early in any debate about pacifism, and I had used it myself a number of times before, to demolish, presumptively, claims to the universal relevance and

potential effectiveness of even the most militant and creative nonviolence. But somehow in the context of this gathering, this time I listened to myself saying it, and suddenly a thought appeared in my mind in the way that is usually represented in cartoon strips as a light bulb appearing over a character's head. The thought was:

But violence didn't save the Jews. Nothing saved the Jews of Europe. They all died.

How was that case an ad for violence, or a discrediting of nonviolent resistance? Certainly the latter might not have worked at all, but then it wouldn't have done any worse than non-resistance--which is what the European Jews actually tried--or the Allied violence.

How could I ever have accepted that traditional test case as a decisive demonstration of the relative merits of violence, the proof of the sometimes necessity and unanswerable legitimacy of violence? Suddenly it seemed self-evident, mockingly blatant, that the fate of the Jews in World War II provided no support at all to the advocacy of violence as an instrument of protection or deterrence.

How could it be that it was so often, so uncritically cited as if it did; and accepted as such by me, so long? How many other

pillars of the world-view I had shared at Harvard, Rand, the Defense Department, were equally biased, ideological, unsound?

To be sure, recent historical accounts had shown that it could be said that saving the Jews of Europe--contrary to widespread assumptions and some declarations--was not really among the wartime aims of the Allies. Therefore it could be argued that violence (ironically like non-violent direct action) had not been fully tried or tested, to this particular end. For example, the British had refused requests from the Jewish underground to bomb the gas chambers at Auschwitz, putting them out of action.

But that, I quickly realized, reviewing the argument in my mind and then, candidly, with Sutherland and Willoughby, didn't save the traditional view. There weren't many violent tactics unused by the Allies that might have saved Jews; but if they had really wanted to save Jews, there were a fair number of well-known non-violent means they could have used.

For example, they could have traded what are now called "non-lethal" or "non-military, humanitarian" supplies (when given to the contras), such as trucks and medicines, for Jewish lives, as the Nazis proposed and the Allies indignantly turned down. Above all, they could have lifted immigration quotas in their own countries, and exerted pressure to get them also lifted elsewhere.



If certain "costs" of such measures seemed too high--a judgment of values and priorities that deserves to be looked at critically--that still didn't undercut the efficacy of such non-violent means, which could have saved many Jewish lives where no violent means could have. (These are measures by the Allies and neutrals. The direct case for the possible efficacy of nonviolent militant action by the European Jews themselves--the earlier the better, in the Thirties--is in fact very strong, for the early years, on the basis of plausible reasoning and analogies, when actually looked at with an unprejudiced eye.)

But as I discussed this, an even more disturbing thought now came to my mind. Raul Hilberg's The Destruction of the European Jews had emphasized the important role of wartime secrecy and wartime operations as a cover for the actual movement of the Jews to the death camps and their subsequent annihilation. Was it possible that the war--i.e., the violent resistance by the Soviets and the British, supported by the US, --had actually been necessary for the initiation of the project of actual annihilation, and thus had contributed to it?

Would it not follow that this self-defense in the face of Nazi aggression--however justifiable on other grounds--contributing to a wartime environment in Germany and Poland, had not only not saved the Jews but had been at the price of the destruction of the Jews, to which it had contributed essentially?

Even if this were true, the determination to defend oneself might still be justified, on balance; but the argument would have to be considerably more tendentious and complicated than was usually admitted. (In effect, this would suppose that Hitler had used the six million Jews as hostages to the non-resistance of the Allies, so that their determination to defend themselves would have been at the conscious price of the killing of the hostages. Hitler did in fact pose the fate of the Jews in more or less these terms, in a speech in January, 1939, though few, apparently, understood his threat, if it was indeed so meant).\_\_

I had the opportunity to pose this anguishing paradox to someone who had lived intimately with such questions during World War II. One of the participants was Martin Niemoller, who had spent over seven years in a Nazi concentration camp after repeatedly, in the face of warnings, denouncing the racial statutes against Jews from his pulpit as the Lutheran Pastor of Berlin.

Throughout the war, he told me, he had not been a pacifist himself (nor before it; he had been a U-boat commander in World War I, before he became a minister). During all his time in the camps, he had regarded the Allied defense and offensives against Hitler as necessary and justified. (He was now a pacifist, he told me, but had not shifted to that position till 1950 and after, when the German nuclear physicist Werner Heisenberg had explained to him the genocidal implications of the thermonuclear weapons that were soon

to come, the successors to the atomic bombs.)

In that light, I led up to my question as tactfully as I could (but without expressing, in advance, the logic of the Hilberg position): Was it possible that the war had been necessary to the actual destruction of the Jews, as distinct from their oppression and incarceration?

Niemoller said at once: "Yes. Definitely. They could never have carried out the genocide except during a war."  
(agreeing, in effect, with Hilberg).

Even more cautiously, I raised the new point (that Hilberg had not addressed): Might it be said, then, that the Allied resistance and counteroffensives had been at the cost of the destruction of the Jews? (i.e., that without this the Jews might not have been actually destroyed).

His answer was equally prompt, and firm: "Of course."

I wasn't sure he had fully understood me. I put it another way and got the same answer. I said to him that he answered so quickly, he seemed to have considered the question before; could that be the case?

He said: "Yes. I often thought about that during the war. I

always reached that conclusion."

I left this pair of conversations with a very uneasy sense that there were a lot of things I had taken for granted for a long time that needed another look. To be specific, everything I had ever believed.

[Note: This will part of the account of the WRI Conference, August 1969: see file, Randy Kehler.]